

Approaching the Apex: The Art and Adventure of Nat Mayer Shapiro
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“Art is an adventure. Abstract Art is an even greater adventure because it occupies the entire person...Although your work is planned ahead of time, a lot is left to chance so that you never know what the outcome is going to be. Therein lies the adventure.” ~ Nat Shapiro, 2005¹

The work of Nat Mayer Shapiro defies categorization. From the 1950s until his death in 2005, Shapiro created an oeuvre of over nine hundred paintings, drawings, assemblages, and sculptures. Although he drew from modernist movements such as expressionism, pure abstraction, and Op Art, his independent spirit and endless curiosity more accurately define his artistic practice.

Despite Shapiro’s diversity of style, medium, and subject, two compelling forces unify his art: an abiding interest in humanity, with all the attendant foibles and marvels, and a formal preoccupation with depth. The artist’s marriage of these forces produced a dynamic catalogue, featuring humorous vignettes of Biblical storytelling, kites dancing in the wind, dizzying optical illusions, whimsical anthropomorphic sculptures, and vivid views into the fathomless cosmos. Be it serious, witty, or ethereal, Shapiro’s art always invites the eye and an enduring conversation.

The Journey into Art: From New York to Paris

Born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, Shapiro began creating art in 1929 when, at ten years old, he embarked on three years of after-school art classes at the Pratt Institute. The arrival of the Great Depression dampened Shapiro’s creativity and there is little evidence of his art as an older adolescent. In 1941, aged 22, Shapiro joined the U.S. Army to serve his country and see the world. Assigned to the Medical Corps, he was stationed in Australia and New Guinea, where he spent his spare time drawing portraits of his comrades and vignettes of the camp (fig. X). When Shapiro left the military in 1946, he continued to paint while recuperating at the Rest & Rehabilitation Center in Lake Placid, New York, focusing on portraits, landscapes, and theater sets. He then resumed his art education by joining the Art Students League in New York City under the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 for World War II veterans, commonly known as the G.I. Bill. He studied at the League for three years and praised his instructors, including the renowned narrative painter Jon Corbino (1905–1964). During this time, Shapiro launched a successful career as a commercial illustrator under the name Nat Mayer.²

While honing his technical skills as an illustrator, Shapiro immersed himself in the history of art, visiting museums and reading treatises. He was particularly drawn to the previous generation of abstract artists, most notably Paul Klee (1879–1940), Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Joan Miró (1893–1983), and Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985). He connected most deeply to the life and art of Klee, who, like Shapiro, was Jewish and disregarded modern trends. Klee’s novel theories of

¹ Interview with Nat Shapiro, video, Nat Mayer Shapiro Archive, Paris, France, 2005.

² Shapiro worked as a freelance illustrator from 1946 to 2000 and illustrated commissions for renowned advertising agencies including BBDO Worldwide, J. Walter Thompson, and Havas. He illustrated for brands such as Ford Motor Cars, Trans Worldwide Airlines (now American Airlines), Omo Detergent, and Sopalin; and created several book covers and illustrations for Reader’s Digest France, Le Livre de Poche, A Red Knight Book, and Brockhampton Press, UK.

form production and pictorial form reveal themselves in Shapiro's many exploratory sketches and interest in elementary forms.³ His predecessors became his teachers; the more he learned about their art, the more he felt compelled to answer his own calling to paint. In the 1950s, Shapiro, now with a wife and two children, moved to Chicago. Here, he established his first painting studio and began what would be a life-long analysis of abstraction.

From 1961 to 1985, Shapiro and his family lived in Paris, where he continued to work as a freelance illustrator and developed a more rigorous studio practice. In 1962, he pursued a year of classes at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. A center for modernist thought in the heart of Paris, the Académie earned its prestige in the early twentieth century for its non-academic, free-thinking curriculum. The Académie educated several artists whom Shapiro admired, including Joan Miró, Marc Chagall, and Fernand Léger. Instead of enforcing academic techniques, the Académie gave Shapiro a looser creative foundation he could call on throughout his career.⁴

As Shapiro stated, his time in Paris opened the door to numerous influences:

*"Europe was my cultural stomping ground and Byzantine art my preoccupation. Visits to Sicily, Italy, Greece, and later Israel, provoked and fed this penchant which is evident in many of my drawings and paintings of that period. These evolved into a fusion of ancient Greek with theocratic overtones and Jewish symbolism."*⁵

The Hebrew Bible: An Atheist's Perspective

Jewish culture and history played an important role in Shapiro's life and work. His parents emigrated from Russia to escape religious persecution and his mother remained observant, ensuring that the family maintained Jewish traditions. She also encouraged Shapiro's early artistic curiosities, which may have planted the seeds of his later interest in painting religious themes.⁶ Despite rejecting religion as an adult, Shapiro nevertheless took an interest in the Hebrew Bible, Kabbalah, and the writings of first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus.⁷

Influenced by the candid representations of religious iconography found in expressionist painting, Shapiro's earliest series titled *Exodus* illustrates biblical scenes from The Book of Shemot (Exodus).⁸ The series comprises seven black-and-white acrylic paintings on canvas created between 1966 and 1967 while Shapiro lived in Paris. His monochrome palette memorializes biblical scenes as historic vignettes or as incidences captured in memory.

³ Paul Klee, *Paul Klee Notebooks Volume 1: The Thinking Eye*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., Ltd, 1961), 33.

⁴ "Célébrités: Académie De La Grande Chaumière," Académie De La Grande Chaumière, June 04, 2020, accessed June 12, 2022.

⁵ Nat Mayer Shapiro, "Statements by Nat Mayer Shapiro," document, Nat Mayer Shapiro Estate Archive, Paris, France, undated.

⁶ Francine Szapiro, "Juifs Américains: L'Art À La Baguette," *Cahiers Bernard Lazare* no. 436 (December 2020), 19.

⁷ Email correspondence with Mirella Shapiro, May 30, 2022.

⁸ Think of George Rouault's painting *Christ Mocked*, 1932, described by Alfred Barr as, "not like the prettified, commercialized art which we often find in churches or shops selling sacred images." Alfred Barr, *What is Modern Painting?* (New York City: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), 22-23.

With this series, Shapiro eliminates color and depth, and his examination becomes one of line and form. *Egyptian Army Trying to Cross the Red Sea* (fig. X) exemplifies the emotional potential of this linework; the swirling brushstrokes of the Red Sea engulf the composition, drowning the flailing, nearly faceless Egyptian soldiers. Shapiro also repurposed Jewish script as aesthetic forms. In *Levis, Guardians of the Temple with Torah* (fig. X), stacked Hebrew characters take on the form of a temple staircase, and in *Moses Talking to God* (fig. X), two adjacent “Yod” characters, a Hebrew method of writing Hashem’s name⁹, replace the horns on Moses’ head. In the painting, Moses blows three shofars, signifying the moment when God gave the prophet the Torah and Tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai. According to Jewish tradition, three shofars symbolize the three vectors of creation: “Mercy (to the right), Discipline (to the left), and Judgment (at the center).”¹⁰ Shapiro’s subtle references to Kabbalistic texts display a deep knowledge of his religious heritage despite being a self-proclaimed atheist.

Later, Shapiro’s religious skepticism more noticeably informed his art. In 1998, now back in New York, Shapiro created a second biblical series titled *Genesis*, once again addressing his Jewish heritage but through a wittier lens. In this array of 32 acrylic on canvas paintings designed to be hung in a row, Shapiro brings humor to the stories and even nods to the erotic, while adding whimsy through the addition of color. In a new version of Moses receiving the Torah and Tablets of the Law, *The Dictation* (fig. X), Shapiro plays with the Bible’s edict that Moses could not look directly at God. To avoid representing God’s face, Shapiro paints God from the back, playfully accentuating his naked behind.

If Shapiro could have fun with the Hebrew Bible, he could also express the darkness of the lived Jewish experience. He was deeply affected by The Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague, a quadrant the size of a city block in which 12,000 tombstones sit atop more than 100,000 bodies buried in layers.¹¹ Shapiro produced five paintings and works on paper of this fifteenth century site: *Jewish Cemetery in Prague*, 1999, *Ancient Jewish Cemetery of Prague*, 1988, *Antique Jewish Cemetery at Prague*, 1986–88, *Ancient Jewish Cemetery, Prague*, n.d., and *Le cimetière Juif à Prague*, 1975 (fig. X). He described the inspiration for these works, writing:

“It is this forced disorder...a field of stones, deep, dense, diverse and sprouting from the ground like wildflowers, watered with small stones of remembrance and sculpted in relief with some of the emotional and pious symbols that reflect Jewish life: acorn, fish, hands with fingers spread between the 2nd and 3rd digits.”¹²

The Dancing Nuns: A Celebration of Form and Fancy

The 1961 Polish film *Matka Joanna od Aniołów* (*Mother Joan of the Angels*), recounting the story of a group of nuns possessed by the devil, inspired Shapiro to paint a series dedicated to

⁹ “Hashem” is Hebrew for “The Name” and is a way some observant Jews refer to God.

¹⁰ Email correspondence with Victor Klausner, June 30, 2022.

¹¹ “Old Jewish Cemetery,” Jewish Museum in Prague, accessed July 11, 2022.

¹² Nat Mayer Shapiro, “Prague—A Field of Stones,” Artist Statement, Nat Mayer Shapiro Archive, Paris, France, 1999.

nuns. He was particularly captivated by a dancing scene in which the nuns' black robes move and swirl like black birds in flight. Shapiro completed 12 works on nuns between 1962 and 2003, exploring the theme on paper, canvas, Foamcore, and Styrofoam. The first of these works is *Dancing Nuns I* (fig. X), completed in 1962, in which Shapiro transforms the nuns into the crows of his imagination. He returned to the theme in 1990 with *Dancing Nuns II*, (fig. X), abandoning monochrome habits in favor of cheerful color. In four other works in this series, Shapiro juxtaposes the visual severity of the nuns' habits with the playfulness of hula hooping, an example being *Nuns with Hula Hoops* (fig. X), completed in 2003. The Nun series highlights Shapiro's characteristic humor: recontextualizing somber religious figures into whimsical forms.

The Kites: Philosophy Takes Flight

In 1979, Shapiro began his Kites series. He returned to the subject frequently until his passing in 2005, producing nearly thirty-nine paintings, assemblages, and sculptures featuring variations of a kite shape. Gliding through the sky, kites embody child-like joy but also the traveling spirit. Notably a quadrilateral composed of two triangles, the toy became another geometric investigation. In choosing the shape, Shapiro demonstrates a possible awareness of the triangles in Kandinsky's paintings and his influential text *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. As Kandinsky postulates, "The life of the spirit may be fairly represented in diagram as a large acute-angled triangle... The whole triangle is moving slowly, almost invisibly forwards and upward. Where the apex was today the second segment is tomorrow."¹³ Kandinsky elaborates that the "apex" is where the visionary thinker stands. Only time and the triangle's forward movement will reveal the visionary's truth to the rest of the triangle. These "forwards and upwards" movements are echoed in Shapiro's kites as they ride a gust of wind.

The earliest dated work from this series, a gouache on paper titled *Blue Kites*, 1979–1980 (fig. X), depicts two blue triangles on a field of horizontal blue stripes. Using slight variations in the shades of blue lines, Shapiro creates the illusion that the triangles move upwards and away from the background. Shapiro's paintings *Kite with Long Strings*, 1997 (fig. X) and *Lost Kite I*, 2005 (fig. X) invoke Kandinsky more explicitly in their use of angular lines, basic geometric forms, and bold, contrasting colors reminiscent of Kandinsky's renowned painting *Composition VIII*, 1923 (fig. X). Remaining true to himself, Shapiro references Kandinsky's existentialism through an object of utter whimsy.

Checkerboards: Exploring Optics

The linear, geometric sensibility of *Blue Kites* also reveals Shapiro's interest in Op Art. A movement that rose to prominence in the 1960s, Op Art is categorized by its disorienting optical illusions of light and depth on flat canvases created through the use of geometric abstraction and Josef Albers' innovative color theories.¹⁴ Shapiro explored this avenue further with his Checkerboard series, consisting of 22 untitled works employing black-and-white grids that experiment with two of his favored preoccupations: dimension and depth (fig. X and X). Created

¹³ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. Michael T. H. Sadler (Middlesex: The Echo Library, 2008), 5.

¹⁴ Laura Hauptman, *The Maximal Sixties: Pop, Op, Figuration from the Drawing Collection* (New York City: Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 5.

in the tradition of op artists Victor Vasarely (1906–1997) and Bridget Riley (1931–), his precise manipulation of a checkerboard pattern tricks the viewer into seeing a third dimension, which at times appears to warp into or swell out of the canvas.

Free-Standing Sculptural Walls: Engaging Time and Space

Although sculpture featured less prominently than painting and drawing in his practice, Shapiro explored three-dimensionality in the 1960-70s with a series of whimsical, anthropomorphic sculptures titled *The King*, 1963 (fig. X), *Three Legged Chair*, 1970 (fig. X), *Friends*, 1974 (fig. X), and *Legs*, 1974–78 (fig. X). Constructed out of wood, Styrofoam, epoxy, and fiberglass, these sculptures blur the line between abstraction and figuration, incorporating shoes, legs, and heads into bulbous organic forms.

Shapiro's interest in the figurative exemplifies itself more subtly in his imposing sculpture, *The Wall – Evolution*, 1974 (fig. X). The wavy freestanding wall offers an abstract black void decorated with organic white lines and colored forms ranging from rudimentary squares to recognizable human eyes. According to Shapiro:

“By the design and undulation on this sculpture, I have tried to show man in constant movement through the centuries, tying, with a white line, his most primitive expression (the square) to that of his intelligence, his intellectualism (the eye). The whole calculated to vaguely resemble a face.”¹⁵

The Galaxy Series: In Search of Infinity

The question of what lies beyond terrestrial existence became a consistent theme towards the end of Shapiro's life, culminating in his final series titled *Galaxy*. In an artist statement, Shapiro describes the galaxy as, “mysterious, volatile and sublime,” perhaps a reflection prompted by an increased awareness of his own mortality.¹⁶ In this series, the corresponding paintings *Passage to Infinity I*, 2005 (fig. X) and *Passage to Infinity II*, 2005 (fig. X) bring a somber and vulnerable investigation, suggesting a contemplation of an afterlife through the eyes of an atheist. In both works, sharp angular lines and a singular, small opaque circle obscure an expanse of vibrant cobalt blue paint. Shapiro's exploration of spirituality through this expression of the cosmos shifts even further away from the religion of his childhood and his playful toying with all things religious. Here, the artist communicates yet another way of seeing and feeling what it is to be human.

To synthesize the oeuvre of Nat Mayer Shapiro is to capture the artistic adventure of a lifetime. Like the man atop Kandinsky's triangle, Shapiro's artistic vision took him beyond the confines of contemporary movements and styles, freeing him to follow his unique and enduring curiosity onto the canvas:

¹⁵ “J’ai essayé de montrer, par sa forme ondulée et le graphisme sur sa face, l’homme en mouvement constant à travers les siècles, liant son expression la plus primitive (le carré) à celle de son intelligence, son intellectualisme (l’œil), moyennant un tracé blanc. Le tout calculé pour ressembler vaguement à un visage.” Nat Mayer Shapiro, “Artist Statement,” Centre national des arts plastiques (CNAP), Paris, France, 1985.

¹⁶ Nat Mayer Shapiro, “Statements by Nat Mayer Shapiro,” document, Nat Mayer Shapiro Estate Archive, Paris, France, undated.

*“Art moves in all unimagined directions and leads to unsuspected dimensions. My art, which lacks definable perimeters, seems to go outside myself. I am honestly unaware of its playful, positive nature as I am of its weight. And yet they are there. In the end, art is as much a mystery to me as it is to others.”*¹⁷

¹⁷ Nat Mayer Shapiro, “Statements by Nat Mayer Shapiro,” document, Nat Mayer Shapiro Estate Archive, Paris, France, undated.